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ABSTRACT

Experiential learning as a field of practice is vast. This paper uses the metaphor of a tree to categorize experiential learning's variety, the roots being the underpinning theoretical traditions and the branches the various forms of practice. The place of experience is highly valued in three traditions of adult education: the progressive, humanist, and radical traditions. The goals, assumptions, and values of these traditions with respect to experiential learning are outlined. All three traditions view the development of the learner's ability to reflect upon experience as the key to learning potential. However, they differ in the nature and purpose of reflection. The progressive tradition taps experience as an additional source of knowledge, the humanist tradition pursues personal wholeness, while the radical tradition sees reflection on experience as a means to empowerment and social transformation. Experiential learning practices may be grouped according to their end use or product: (1) documentation and assessment of learning from prior experience, perhaps to gain entry to higher education or to advanced standing; (2) use of experience in self-directed learning and learner-centered instruction as forms of educational innovation; (3) consciousness raising to effect social change; and (4) individual growth and development through personal reflection. The roots and branches of various organizations that use experiential learning are discussed, and emerging practices are examined. (Contains 10 references.) (SV)

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THE ROOTS & BRANCHES OF EXPERIENTIAL DEVELOPMENT

Dr Tony Saddington

Experiential Learning as a field of practice is vast. If we look at the range we see everything from farming to conflict resolution; from assessment to youth development; from practical skill training to theoretical models; and from personal growth to workplace training and development. All are labelled experiential learning - all are presented as being part of the experiential learning family.

What then counts as experiential learning? For some people it is all of education - for others it is narrowed down to a specific practice or curriculum model. The vast array of educational activities using the term experiential learning can be seen in Jane Henry's work.[1]

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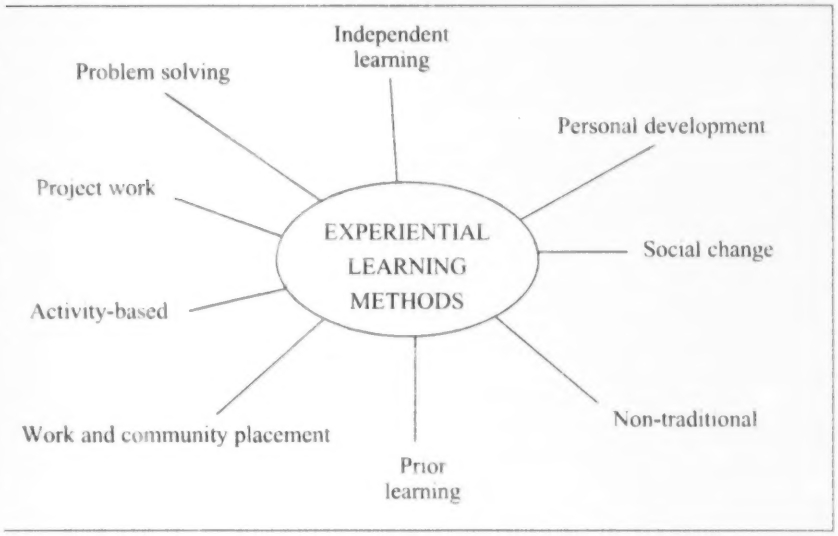

Figure 1

This wide range of practices can be fitted into various schema. In this paper I wish to use the metaphor of a tree - the tree of experiential learning - to categorise them. I will explore the roots and branches of this tree - the roots being the underpinning theoretical traditions and theories and the branches being the forms of practice we find ourselves working within. I believe that as experiential learning practitioners it is important for us to be aware of both the range of practices and the theoretical roots. These understandings will help us develop and strengthen our own practice.

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The roots of experiential learning

The roots of experiential learning are many and varied. I will explore some of the roots using three of the five traditional philosophical roots of adult education[iii] - progressive, humanist and radical - highlighting the key values of each and their support of experiential learning.[iv]

I begin with a "map" of the three traditions showing the important assumptions held by each and their use of the learner's experience. For the sake of brevity the map has been simplified. While it represents the traditions coherently, albeit naively, it does so at the expense of the complexities of the real world of educational strategy. It is not an in depth analysis - rather a tentative "stock-taking"

THEORETICAL TRADITIONS AND EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING IN ADULT EDUCATION			
	Progressive Tradition	Humanist Tradition	Radical Tradition
Social problem taken most seriously	Social change	Personal meaninglessness	Oppression
Underlying theory of social development	Reform	Self-actualisation	Social transformation
Best metaphor for educational process	Problem-solving	Personal growth	Empowerment
Key value	Democracy	Self acceptance	Freedom
What counts as "knowledge"?	Judgement and the ability to act	Wholeness	Praxis (Reflective thought & action)
The educator's task	Guidance	Support	Conscientization
How an educated person is described?	Responsible	Integrated	Liberated
Role of the learner's life experience	A source of learning and inseparable from knowledge	The source of knowledge and the content of curriculum	Basic to understanding the societal context and therefore the source of knowledge
Types of experience mainly used	Structured	Personal focus	Self in society

Figure: 2

The progressive tradition

The progressive tradition grew out of a reaction to liberal education in an attempt to respond to the social and political changes in the early decades of the 20th century. The emphasis of education changed from cultivating the intellect to focusing on individuals having a responsibility towards the society in which they lived. Education was seen as an instrument of social and political reform, which had a major role to play in the maintenance and extension of democracy.

The progressive tradition sees education as life-long and therefore "learning how to learn" is important for learners. They can then continue to use both the knowledge they gain from their own experience and the knowledge they gain from others and books in solving problems and bringing about social change. Experimental or problem-based methods are favoured because progressive education is about solving human problems.

Leading progressive educator John Dewey argued for education to be both liberal and practical. Common forms of progressive adult education include community development, participatory planning, community education, group dynamics and experimental learning.

The centrality of human experience in the progressive tradition means that the learner's experience is highly valued and is at least equal to the experience of others stored away in the written word. Knowledge is seen as inseparable from life experience and finds its validity in the degree to which it can be linked to or integrated with the experience of the learner. This supports the concepts of reflection and learning from experience which are basic to all experiential learning. This focus on what is useful to the learner changes the role of "teacher" to one of "guide" Malcolm Knowles describes the educator as a "helper, guide, encourager, consultant and resource" as contrasted with a "transmitter, disciplinarian, judge and authority".[v] Teachers are not the sole source of knowledge but can also learn from the knowledge and experience of the learner - they are partners in the learning activities. "The teacher is a learner, and the learner is, without knowing it, a teacher" (John Dewey).[vi]

One of the critiques of the Progressive tradition is that the focus on improving an individual's life in society can contradict and be in conflict with the creation of a more desirable society. This promotion of individual growth sometimes at the expense of the promotion of the good of society can cause this tradition to be seen as elitist.

The humanistic tradition

The humanist tradition has its roots in existentialist[vii] and humanist[viii] thought of the 20th Century. The underlying assumption of this tradition is based on the belief that human beings are inherently good. Existentialists claim that a person is not ready-made but

rather a "designer of her/his own being and essence".[ix] Consequently the tradition focuses on the development of the whole person. Learning is therefore a process of discovery and experimentation with the principle goal being individual "self-actualisation". Self-actualisation is described as "helping the person become the best he (sic) is able to become".[x] [xi]

In this tradition the teacher acts as a "facilitator" and "enabler" of the learner's growth. Learning occurs through group interaction, participation, experimentation and discovery. The responsibility for learning is placed on the learner who is at the centre of the experience. Learner freedom and autonomy are linked to the concept of self-directed learning[xii] in the drive towards personal liberation and enrichment. The focus is on personal integration and psychological development - "it is education that has a lot in common with healing and it lives most comfortably in therapeutic contexts, encounter groups and counselling".[xiii] Forms of humanistic education include growth groups, encounter groups and self-directed learning groups.

In humanistic education experience is the source of knowledge and the content of the curriculum. As learners reflect on their own experience so they take possession of it in a new way and gain knowledge which is authentic because it is true for their life-worlds. This repossession of experience is a personal discovery of knowledge which enables the learner to become more whole (a "fully-functioning person"). With the focus in humanistic education on personal discovery and experimentation, the use of the experience of others, actual or recorded, is limited. It is useful only as it supports the learner's own discoveries or poses questions which require further reflection.

The major critique of the humanistic tradition is that it apparently ignores a less-than-perfect complex real world through its focus on personal development. There is also the issue of whether a learner-centred or self-directed learning approach is possible or even desirable in every learning situation.

The radical tradition

The radical tradition has its historical roots in various movements: anarchism, Marxism, socialism and the Freudian Left.[xiv] This tradition has two main strands - the Deschooling Movement[xv] and Paulo Freire's theory of conscientization. Whilst it can be argued that the other traditions are all political through "different forms of innocence"[xvi] it is the radical tradition that makes its central commitment explicitly political - education is part of social transformation. For this tradition, education is not neutral. It can only be understood by locating it in its structural and historical context.

With the exception of Freire, the main concern has been with schooling. Ivan Illich called for an elimination of schools because he felt that the mandatory nature of education oppresses and dehumanises people. Schools were seen as part of society's shaping of a

person's "view of reality" and were therefore oppressive.[xvii] Illich's concern was for personal autonomy and the freedom to choose to learn. As alternatives he proposed "resource centres", skill exchanges, peer matching and a system of independent educators[xviii].

Central to Freire's work is the belief that societal and individual liberation are interdependent. The focus of education is on bringing about a new social order by changing the structures of society and liberating the individual from a false consciousness which is unaware of the structural and historical forces which have domesticated her/him. Reflective thought and action (praxis) are seen to be dialectically related. It is through dialogue and engagement in society that awareness and insight into the learner's world and social reality come about.[xix] The teacher is a facilitator who guides and questions instead of providing answers and directions for the learner. Freire described the true function of education as radical conscientization and called for a problem-posing approach to education as opposed to the more traditional "banking" form of education.

The life experience of the learner and a critical analysis of this are at the centre of this process of conscientization. As learners interrogate their own experience so they are able to reinterpret it and understand the societal context within which they find themselves. This understanding leads the learner to action, which again becomes experience to be reflected upon. Therefore life experience is the source of learners' knowledge which liberates them and provides them with the tools for changing the society in which they live.

Both strands of radical adult education believe in the need to develop forms and practices within the context of revolutionary action but we find few examples of their practice. This is mainly because most educators whilst challenged by Illich and Freire's writings are working within "stable" institutionalised education systems, where reform (rather than revolution) is the way to effect change. The major exception to this is Freire's work in Brazil, Chile and some other third world countries where the main thrust is literacy. Other examples of the radical tradition are to be found in A S Neill's Summerhill School here in Britain and the work by Douglas Reed on "the empowering learning process"[xx].

Whilst the radical tradition engages directly with the problems of political commitment, radical educators need to guard against the danger of using education solely as a political tool and ignoring the pluralistic nature of most cultures. Emphasising political revolution can lead to artificial polarisation and actually create conflict. "Co-ordinators" (teachers) need to avoid becoming the "experts" and slipping back into a teacher-learner relationship of dependency. This tradition has most powerfully challenged education as and when it has attempted to remain neutral. The empowerment of the learner in this tradition fits with the need to encourage learners to become more self-reflective and critical in understanding their own life experience. Radical educationalists argue that there is a need for learners to be able to reflect critically on their own process of socialization and

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to relate their personal learnings to societal issues and structures. The ability to reflect in this way requires that learners develop skills of inquiry to enable them to reinterpret and appropriate this experience. Paulo Freire called this ability "critical reflection".[xxi] The challenge to the non-radical educationalists is that unless experiential learning includes this critical reflection phase, then learners will be avoiding the "social structural processes and issues" of today's world.[xxii] The danger of turning a "blind eye" to the social and political context is very real for an experiential learning approach which focuses solely on the individual in "here and now" situations[xxiii].

The traditions and experiential learning

Within these three theoretical traditions of adult education the place of experience is highly valued. For the humanist and radical traditions knowledge has its source in the experience of the learner. Whilst their educational goals differ, the development of the learner's ability to reflect upon this experience is the key to their learning potential. The three traditions see experience as providing the learner with a "rich resource" to learn from and a "base" upon which to build new learnings.

In examining these three traditions it is also clear that experiential learning finds strongest support and use in the humanist and radical traditions, with the progressive tradition using it as a learning strategy or curriculum methodology. However, it is important to note that there is a major difference between these traditions in terms of the nature and purpose of reflection in the experiential learning process. In the progressive tradition it is to tap experience as an additional source of knowledge. In the humanist tradition it is about learning towards personal wholeness whilst in the radical tradition it is towards empowerment and social transformation.

(Which tradition do you feel most at home in?)

The branches of experiential learning

The branches growing out of this trunk of the experiential learning tree can, like the roots, be classified in various ways. Jane Henry's diagram is useful here, to collect and order the branches (forms of practice). However a simpler grouping can be obtained if we use the four village model proposed by Susan Weil and Ian McGill[xxiv]. The model of four villages groups the vast range of experiential learning practices into four main groupings:
The assessment and accreditation of prior experiential learning.
Experiential learning and change in higher and continuing education.
Experiential learning and social change.
Personal growth and development.

This model was developed out of the work of the First International Conference on Experiential Learning at Regent's College in London in July 1987. Delegates came from all over the world to share their views and theories of experiential learning. As we listened to each other we found ourselves asking: *but why do you think that is experiential learning?* We were each caught (trapped) in our own particular version (village) of experiential learning without realising it. What that conference did was to challenge us to move out of our own village and learn from the practices of others and so enrich our own.

Village one: the assessment and accreditation of prior experiential learning.

The practices in this village focus on assessment and accreditation. Here, reflection is about recording (documenting) and assessing the learner's experience. The notion being that learning from prior situations (experience) can be assessed and that that assessment can lead to either access (entry) into Higher Education or to advanced standing (credits or fast tracking). Globally this village goes by many different names[xxv] - APEL (Assessment of Prior Experiential Learning), APL (Assessment of Experiential Learning) APA (Assessment of Prior Achievement), PLA (Prior Learning Assessment) and RPL (Recognition of Prior Learning) to name a few. The practices used in this village have also spread from education into the world of work and are used for securing jobs and for advancement.

The driving force behind the development of APEL has been a mix of demographic, economic and social factors along with altruistic concerns amongst practitioners to take seriously the needs and interests of adult learners and to widen access to learning opportunities for reasons of equity. The first example of APEL is found in the United States in the GI Bill of 1946 which dealt with returning World War 2 veterans who wanted their skills recognised by universities. Their prior learning had to conform to, and was evaluated against traditional course material. This village draws heavily on the progressive and humanist traditions which emphasise the importance of experience and life-long learning.

Village two: experiential learning and change in higher and continuing education.

The practices in this village are to do with curriculum innovation. The concepts of learner responsibility, self-directed learning, learner centredness and learning from experience find their expression here in practices which change the traditional teaching situation into a learning environment committed to learning practices which transform the curriculum. The work of John Dewey and more recently David Kolb, David Boud and others bring the learner closer to centre stage as the possessor of hidden and untapped knowledge which is unveiled through a reflective process on personal and life experience. The progressive philosophical tradition of education most deeply supports this village.

Village three: experiential learning and social change.

The practices in this village are about confronting individuals and groups with the reality of their worlds. This village with its roots in the radical philosophical tradition and the work of social activists such as Saul Alinski, is about empowerment and social change. The reflective process cannot just be personal but also needs to take into account the contextual realities. Through this form of reflection (conscientization) individuals become aware of their societal context and are empowered to work to change it.

Village four: personal growth and development.

The practices in this village are aimed at the growth and development of the individual through personal reflection on one's self, communication and inter-relationships with others. The humanist tradition with its focus on the development of the individual (the self) is central with key figures being Carl Rogers and Abraham Maslow. The key notion is one of personal responsibility for one's self and therefore also for one's learning.

(Which village do you see yourself working in?)

As we examine the branches of experiential learning further we see that the villages (branches) intertwine and cross over each other. Staying at the level of practice I want now to look at some actual cases in the form of organisations who claim to practise experiential learning. What is apparent is that their presenting face is often simple and uncomplicated, yet their programmes and involvements are complex. An organisation can, for example, be labelled as Village 1 or Village 4, but then you discover that the work they do is actually across the villages and draws on a variety of roots.

Good examples of this are three organisations in the USA: AEE (Association for Experiential Education), NSEE (National Society for Experiential Education) and CAEL (Council for Adult and Experiential Learning). Counterpart examples to these in the UK would be organisations such as LET (Learning from Experience Trust) and Brathay Hall Trust.

At first glance AEE is "outward bound" or adventure education. Whilst its roots are still firmly planted in this, they now engage in youth service, management development training, peace education and environmental education (not unlike Brathay). AEE currently promotes professional groups in areas such as experience-based training and development, therapeutic adventure, and women in experiential education. Their vision is to be a leading international organisation for the development and application of experiential education principles and methodologies and to promote positive social change - a long way from the initial "outward bound" focus.

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NSEE has its roots in internships - the practice of sending students out into workplaces or communities to learn. Their present work includes many new forms of practice, from cross-cultural education to service learning. In their list of current activities they cover school-to-work transitions, leadership development, co-operative education, career development and even outdoor education.

CAEL has its roots in APEL - they call it PLA (Prior Learning Assessment). Now it is involved in workplace education and development; professional development programmes for adult educators; and advocacy work, which aims to foster change in policies affecting adult learners. Whilst still strongly committed to PLA, it has broadened to encompass a diverse set of activities which include support services and development opportunities for educational institutions; professionals in the field of adult education; designing and administering workforce education programmes; developing public policy recommendations related to workforce education and adult learning; and consulting with employers to develop education strategies and learning systems. These are all moves away from simply "assessment" work to curriculum work; education and training; counselling; quality control for organisations and businesses; project planning and design; and advocacy.

This move from single focus to multi-focus can be seen in many experiential learning organisations. I believe this to be a strength - the more we can broaden practice through drawing on a range of roots, the more able the organisation is to develop and diversify its practices.

New roots and branches

New branches (forms) of experiential learning are continually being developed. Some from cuttings taken from other trees in the larger forest of educational theory and practice. For example some of the work being done in South Africa on APEL - we call it RPL (Recognition of Prior Learning) has made links between RPL and the work of Vygotski. This has broadened the concept of RPL from just "assessment" to a reworking of the total curriculum. The reality is that a single focus like RPL can become too routine - mechanistic and unhelpful - unless this kind of development is done. Other examples are the move by CAEL from PLA to workplace development and education, the expanding of AEE from outward bound to management development and peace education and NSEE's move from internships to cross-cultural education. These examples illustrate how important this cross fertilisation is if we are to develop new and exciting practices supported by strong theoretical roots. The development of new buds (like action learning for example) need to be encouraged. Let's not be sceptical of new formulations of experiential learning but rather encourage these buds to grow, to sprout and to develop.

So, is the experiential learning tree healthy and growing? My answer is YES - witness the variety of areas represented here at this conference and the ways that numerous organisations are changing and developing. These are all signs of health and growth.

A warning though - sometimes trees need to be trimmed - old wood lopped off! We need to be constantly alert to our old wood - to stop the rot setting in. A year ago I moved from Cape Town to Wellington, a small town 80km (50 miles) from Cape Town in the heart of the winelands. Recently they began pruning the vines to promote new growth. Without proper and sometimes drastic pruning the vines become unproductive - a lesson for us all?

We also need to nourish the roots with new ideas, theories and challenges to our potentially outdated perspectives. We must use the challenges presented by people like Robin Usher, Danny Wildemeersch, Nadinne Cruz, Stephen Kemmis, David Boud and others to enrich our work. This can only lead to new branches, new developments and new growth!

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References and footnotes: ***See end of this Section.***

APPENDIX 5

REFERENCES & FOOTNOTES FOR TONY SADDINGTON'S LECTURE

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i Henry, Jane (1989) "Meaning and practice in Experiential Learning" in Weil, Susan and McGill, Ian (1989) Making Sense of experiential learning, SRHE & Open University Press, Milton Keynes, pp.29-33. (In this chapter Henry presents a more complex diagram of experiential learning methods which are all grouped under the diagram used in this paper.)

ii The main traditions of adult education theory and practice can be grouped into five areas: "Liberal", "Progressive", "Humanistic", "Radical" and "Technological". This grouping follows the distinctions proposed by John Elias and Sharon Merriam. I am aware that some writers see the progressive tradition as being one of two strands of the liberal tradition. The other strand being the "cultivation of the intellect". However for the purpose of this paper I will not use the liberal and behaviourist traditions as they have provided few, if any, roots for experiential learning.

Any consideration of the theoretical traditions is a major piece of work. It is important, therefore, that I state at the outset what I will not be doing. Whilst each tradition has been greatly influenced by the particular problems, issues and challenges that existed in the context and culture in which it was developed I will not be dealing in any depth with this historical background or the social contexts within which the traditions arose. It is a tentative "stock-taking" rather than a comprehensive overview.

iii Elias, John and Merriam, Sharon (1980) Philosophical traditions of Adult Education, Robert Krieger, Malabar, Florida
and
Darkenwald, Gordon and Merriam, Sharon (1982) Adult Education, Foundations of Practice, Harper & Row, New York

iv Saddington, Tony, 1994, "Experiential learning and the theoretical traditions of adult education" should be referred to for a fuller version of this.

v Knowles, Malcolm, (1970) The modern practice of adult education: andragogy versus pedagogy, Association Press, New York, p. 34.

vi Dewey, John quoted in Elias and Merriam, op cit. p. 162.

vii Heidegger, Buber and Satre.

viii Maslow and Rogers.

ix Elias and Merriam, op cit. p. 111.

x Rogers, Carl (1961) On Becoming a Person , Houghton Mifflin, Boston.

xi Maslow, AH (1970) Motivation and Personality, Harper and Row, New York.

xii Knowles, Malcolm (1975) Self Directed Learning: A Guide for Learners and Teachers, Association Press, New York.

xiii Millar, Clive (1991) "Critical reflection for educators of adults: getting a grip on the scripts for professional action", unpublished, p. 4.

xiv Key person in the Freudian Left is William Reich.

xv Key person is Ivan Illich.

xvi Millar, op cit. p. 4.

xvii Illich quoted in Darkenwald and Merriam, op cit. p. 59.

xviii Resource centres were described as places where learners could freely choose to pursue their own learning goals.

xix This was described by Freire as a process of "conscientization" which he said was particularly important for those living in what he called a "culture of silence".
Freire, Paulo (1978) Pedagogy in Process: The Letters to Guinea-Bissau, Writers and Readers Publishing Co-operative, London.

xx Amongst Reed's principles for the "empowering learning process" are the "use of the social experience of the learners as the basic content, the raw material of the learning process" and the need to "link learner's practice to the historical development of society".

Cunningham, Phyllis, 1983, "Helping students extract meaning from experience", in New Directions for Continuing Education, No 19 September 1983, p. 63.

[xxi] Freire, op cit. p. 100.

[xxii] Hudson, Annie (1983) "The Policies of Experiential Learning", pp. 81-92, in Boot, R and Reynolds, M (eds) Learning and Experience in Formal Education, Manchester Monograph, University of Manchester, Manchester, p. 81

[xxiii] Hudson states: "the celebration in experiential learning of the individual and of subjectivity has exacerbated the dominant focus on micro processes to the detriment of an assessment of macro or social structural processes and issues", Hudson, op cit. p. 81.

[xxiv] Weil and McGill, op cit. p.3.

[xxv] Harris, Judy and Saddington, Tony (1995) The recognition of prior learning (RPL): international models of assessment and their impact on South African education and training practice, Department of Adult Education and Extra-Mural Studies, University of Cape Town, Cape Town.